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ROSS SPEER

*The Machiavellian Marxism of Althusser and Gramsci*1. *Introduction*

This paper compares two Marxist interpretations of Machiavelli in order to better understand why, twice over, Marxists have returned to Machiavelli. I argue that Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, the authors of the interpretations discussed here, both find resources in Machiavelli's work for the development of a non-deterministic Marxism that emphasises the role of political practice in enacting transitions between social forms. Machiavelli's primary insight on their accounts is his rejection of a theoretical method that involves passive observation of its object in favour of a political philosophy that actively intervenes within the conjuncture, the unique set of circumstances, in which it is developed. The two interpretations should be seen as largely complementary, with Althusser building on Gramsci's earlier work. This leaves us in a position to suggest their respective thought may have more affinity than is sometimes recognized.

The aim here is not to establish the truth or falsity of the two Marxist interpretations, with regards to the historical Machiavelli. Instead, it is to analyze the innovations produced under his impact on Marxist thought. It is the original positions developed by Gramsci and Althusser, through the use of Machiavelli, which concern us. In particular, I seek out the common themes that emerge across the work of Gramsci and Althusser through a comparative approach. This fosters an understanding of how work on Machiavelli has contributed, and can continue to contribute, to Marxist political philosophy as a whole.

The argument is organized as follows. Section 1 examines how Gramsci and Althusser understand the role of political practice for Machiavelli. Both interpretations see Machiavelli as having successfully integrated theory and practice by concentrating on the conjuncture in which he wrote. *The Prince* operates as a revolutionary manifesto, a call to action, within this conjuncture. This is done so as to effect a political transformation in the form of a new State. Machiavelli emphasizes how political practice can take advantage of possibilities posed by conjunctures, thereby denying any necessary or linear route of historical progression. Section 2 explains the philosophical consequences of treating political practice in this manner before investigating the implications for a Marxist theory of politics. Only Althusser systematically draws philosophical conclusions from Machiavelli, but they are conclusions already partially anticipated by Gramsci. The resultant philosophy of 'aleatory materialism' emphasises the role of contingency in history over laws of development. In order for politics to be the space where practice can alter the course of history, it must be conceived of as autonomous from other social structures. This poses a challenge to the Marxist theory of history, historical materialism, as it breaks with its core assumption of the interconnection of social spheres. The final section seeks to demonstrate that this concept of politics might prove less troublesome for historical materialism than initially seems to be the case. This is achieved by asserting

the continuing salience of the category of ‘mode of production’ for the two interpretations. In doing so we examine the changes this category must undergo in order to incorporate the revised conception of politics and the effects of indeterminate practice found in the second section.

## 2. *The Political Practice of The Prince and The Prince*

Gramsci presents Machiavelli as first and foremost a theorist of Italian national unity who sought the foundation of a “new State”<sup>1</sup>. The Apennine peninsula was divided in to an assortment of city-states that competed with each other for dominance. The future of these city-states was precarious given their outward exposure to the powerful Absolutist monarchies of France and Spain. Machiavelli hoped to alleviate this situation by overcoming the internal divisions of Italy through the formation of a unified Italian nation-State. In order for this to be a truly national State it must be a popular State. Therefore, Gramsci argues, the intended audience of *The Prince* must be the people of Italy rather than princes. If *The Prince* were actually directed at rulers Machiavelli would be a bad Machiavellian. *The Prince* only serves to “give the game away”, to popularize knowledge of the methods of control<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, as Althusser adds, those that do rule have long managed successfully without Machiavelli’s help<sup>3</sup>. To envisage *The Prince* as a guidebook for rulers is thus surely a mistaken approach. Its real purpose must be to educate “those who are not in the know”<sup>4</sup>. Given that *The Prince* seeks to speak to a popular agency in order to carry through political changes, it is best understood as an example of a revolutionary manifesto.

Machiavelli is then, Gramsci argues, “a man wholly of his period”<sup>5</sup>. Althusser concurs: “Not only are Machiavelli’s writings no longer novel for us, they are outmoded, even outdated”<sup>6</sup>. Constructing an Italian national State is a historical task that has no contemporary relevance for us. Understood in this way Machiavelli is of historical interest, but is no more than that. Seemingly paradoxically, Althusser reverses course: “these texts are not any the less gripping, but remain so”<sup>7</sup>. What is really present is “a theoretical discovery: a purchase ... on politics, on its *practice*”<sup>8</sup>. What we can recover from Machiavelli today has not so much to do with the task he sets out to achieve but in *how* he sets out to achieve it.

Following Gramsci’s line of argument, Althusser describes Machiavelli as the first conscious theorist of the conjuncture<sup>9</sup>. Machiavelli does not reflect *on* this conjuncture,

<sup>1</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, in Id., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. by G. Elliot, London, Verso, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

as if outside of it, but rather thinks from *within* the conditions in which he works. The relevance of this is twofold. Firstly it is a submission to the determinations of the particular circumstance, the singular case. The situation of 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy is unique in its specificity and no simple importation of the French and Spanish models is possible. It is this embrace of the specific features of the conjuncture that Machiavelli describes when he says that “it seems to me better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations”<sup>10</sup>. Machiavelli consciously positions himself internal to the structure that he wishes to transform. Secondly, it means that the conjuncture poses the problem of Italian national unity rather than Machiavelli, whose role is only to acknowledge it<sup>11</sup>. Machiavelli’s work is neither descriptive nor speculative. That which “ought to be” – the Italian nation-state – is situated on Machiavelli’s horizon as a possible objective<sup>12</sup>. The various elements required for the creation of this State exist but remain to be cohered in to the new form. The means by which Machiavelli moves from ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be’, without resorting to mere speculation, is through an attempt to integrate the dimension of political practice in to his work. Machiavelli, according to Althusser, does not provide objective knowledge, and thus cannot be considered a political scientist, because he takes this political practice in to account<sup>13</sup>.

Seen in this way Machiavelli becomes, in Gramsci’s terms, a “man of action”, an “active politician”, a “creator” and “initiator”<sup>14</sup>. The peoples of the Apennine Peninsular could only be transformed in to a homogenized Italian nation through a struggle for an Italian State, and an Italian State could only be created by such a unified popular agency. The figure of The Prince presents the possibility for doing so by being the mediation between the textual call to arms, *The Prince*, and the requisite agency - the popular classes. The Prince, Gramsci says, “had no real historical existence ... but was a pure theoretical abstraction”<sup>15</sup>. Machiavelli does not tell us who this Prince will be or where he will come from. The Prince is an undiscovered leader who must lead the people to establish a new State. Machiavelli’s politics is expressed not “as learned theorising”, but through the action of The Prince on a “shattered people” in order to “arouse and organise its collective will”<sup>16</sup>. This unknown Prince actualizes the political philosophy of *The Prince* by activating the revolutionary agency of the people.

In arguing that Machiavelli seeks the unity of theory and practice within the abstraction of The Prince, Gramsci, Althusser contends, fails to follow through with the insight. If The Prince has no true existence embodied in a determinate figure then what Machiavelli is doing is aiming “*beyond what exists*”, thinking at the very limits of the real in order “to attain a goal *that does not exist*”<sup>17</sup>. He takes us beyond the limits of the

<sup>10</sup> N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans by Q. Skinner & R. Price, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> L. Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude”, in Id., *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 134; *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 73.

principality forms that governed Italy. The new State can only emerge from that which does not exist, a place of emptiness. Its construction cannot be achieved by transposing the external forms found elsewhere in Western Europe nor can it be built from the development of any of the existing structures present in Italy, neither the city-states nor any existing rulers. For Althusser, “the great adventure begins apart from everything that actually exists, hence in an unknown place with an unknown man”<sup>18</sup>.

The Prince, in which Gramsci bound theory and practice, can then be described as a “*determinate absence*”<sup>19</sup>. It is an absence posed by the conjuncture but is nonetheless empty, waiting to be filled. *The Prince* is an empty space waiting to “have inserted in it the action of the individual or group who will come and take a stand there”<sup>20</sup>. The transformation that Machiavelli seeks is dependent upon the role of The Prince being occupied and the success of their practical action. Political practice is elevated to primacy over structural causality. Only *possibilities* are posed by the conjuncture.

Althusser has now brought us to what he believes to be the key to the entire text. Theory and practice are not unified by The Prince but rather by *The Prince*. The nonexistence of The Prince denotes the empty space to be filled. *The Prince*, for its part, shatters the “traditional theoretical text” insofar as it invites us to occupy the space of The Prince<sup>21</sup>. It interpellates us as revolutionary agents. This much is exposed by its dual viewpoint. Monarchist interpretations of Machiavelli have taken the call for the rule of The Prince literally. Democratic interpretations see *The Prince* as addressed to the people. This appears as an intractable ambiguity. It can only be resolved by understanding Machiavelli as inviting the reader to engage in the requisite political practice, to be The Prince, and thus holding both positions at once. The “political problem” of *The Prince* delimits the space of political practice and is also an intervention within it, transforming that very space in its effort to arrest it<sup>22</sup>. The attempt to capture the empty space of political practice in thought redefines its boundaries as soon as that thought becomes inscribed in a subject. The Prince is the political vacuum of Italy that awaits fulfilment. *The Prince* hails those who might fill this vacuum and it calls upon them to become The Prince. Machiavelli makes *The Prince* “serve as a means in the struggle”<sup>23</sup>.

There are three effects of the Gramscian-Althusserian interpretation of which we may now take stock. The first is the integration of political practice in to the form of a text, enabled by submission to the conjunctural determinations. Machiavelli resists the imperatives of traditional theory which command one to step outside and perform the role of a passive observer. In refusing to do so, Machiavelli becomes a philosopher of praxis. Theory and practice are unified in a textual form that becomes active. *The Prince* does not advise or describe a Prince; it seeks to create one.

Secondly, the way Machiavelli integrates political practice into his work is by making it the primary means by which a transition might come to pass. Accordingly,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

failure in the task posed by the conjuncture is always possible. That which appears as ‘necessary’ might still not happen. This conception relies upon presenting politics as possessing autonomy from other social structures. If politics is to be the space for creating transformations it cannot be hampered by what is already in existence. This is why Machiavelli leaves behind prevailing moral notions in his discussion of what The Prince should do. Political practice at a moment of transition cannot be subject to pre-existing morality as it seeks to go beyond it. Herein has been Machiavelli’s power to shock: his detachment of the political sphere from all pre-existing ideological structures. What Gramsci and Althusser both find in Machiavelli is not only someone who subjects theory to political practice, but someone who assists in theorizing the relation and location of politics within a social typology.

The third effect is of a philosophical order. *The Prince*, Althusser argues, speaks to us because it calls on us to be *potential* agents of “a *potential* political practice”<sup>24</sup>. However, this cannot be contained by “traditional philosophical thought”<sup>25</sup>. By thinking *in* the conjuncture, thereby elevating the indeterminacy of political practice to the primary means of historical transition, Machiavelli is able to conceive of politics in a new way that differs from the main trend in Western philosophy. Of the two, only Althusser registers this philosophical consequence explicitly. Gramsci directs our attention to it but neglects to develop it. The need to do so, however, is not only to grapple with Machiavelli but Gramsci too. Althusser claims that Gramsci is elusive to his readers for the same reason that Machiavelli is<sup>26</sup>. The philosophical current that Machiavelli is claimed for is dubbed ‘aleatory materialism’ by Althusser.

### 3. *Machiavelli, Politics, and Aleatory Materialism*

Althusser understands Machiavelli through the lens of a ‘subversive’ philosophical current that runs against the dominant direction of Western philosophy. Machiavelli rejects both the perennial stability of social forms and the inevitability of their supersession in favour of the indeterminacy of political practice. What Gramsci was the first to realise was *The Prince*’s “double reflection of political practice” in the text and of the text “in political practice”<sup>27</sup>. But Gramsci’s lingering teleology disables him. He does not draw the *aleatory* conclusions that Althusser does in which there is an ultimate lack of guarantees when it comes to trying to found a new State. Whilst Althusser thinks that Gramsci is right to see Machiavelli as a philosopher of praxis he charges him with underestimating the implications for Marxist philosophy.

In Althusser’s reading, the idea that a unifying principle or law governed the order of the world was a core hypothesis of the main current of Western philosophical thought. As a philosophical tradition it had long been preoccupied with this question, positing answers in the guises of Nature or Reason amongst others. In one way or

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 32; my emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

another, the canonical thinkers were all concerned with discovering this law. Hegelian teleology was merely its most modern iteration<sup>28</sup>. From a Marxist perspective, the issue lay in conceiving of history as a necessary procession of stages. This schema could only be constructed from the viewpoint of a terminus towards which history progressed. Political practice could not, therefore, be the dominant influence on historical development since its success must be guaranteed in advance by a law outside of it. Failure in practice could never permanently derail the procession of history. Its governing law would always return and rectify the journey towards the historical telos. Gramsci works under the pressure of Machiavelli to reconsider this vision. But Althusser accuses him of continuing to labour within this Hegelian problematic and thus of being unable to realise the implications of his own thought.

Althusser argues that there was a hitherto unrecognised philosophical tradition that had run alongside and intersected with, but was radically opposed to, this principal tenet of the main Western tradition. Machiavelli is not, as Althusser sees it, the first thinker of this current<sup>29</sup>. But Machiavelli is considered to be one of its most important, second only to Marx<sup>30</sup>. The way in which Machiavelli places political practice at the centre of his thinking has a profound consequence. The supposedly 'necessary' form of the new State is wholly dependent upon the emergence of a Prince and their ability to actually perform the task at hand. No law of history will step in to take charge if The Prince fails. If the new social form is to come to pass then it will have its origin in political practice and not a law of history. We have already seen that the site of this practice is a place of emptiness. It is what Althusser calls the aleatory *void*.

This *void* is, according to Althusser, the absence of any governing ontological laws and or transhistorical meaning, as well as the empty site of political practice waiting to be filled. It is the place in which resides the persistent threat of instability which haunts everything currently in existence<sup>31</sup>. In the case of Italy the various components required to form a new State exist, hence why Machiavelli is able to pose it as a possibility, but remain unconnected. If this is to happen a *swerve* must occur, causing collisions between the various components, which Althusser models as *atoms* falling within the *void*. The *swerve* is thus the origin of all social forms<sup>32</sup>. It induces *encounters* between the atomised components, which combine to form something new. The *swerve* takes its place as the most important category for what comes in to being. The form the elements eventually acquire is provided, in a characteristically Althusserian fashion, by the relations between them rather than by their own innate qualities. There are, then, an infinite variety of

<sup>28</sup> For Althusser's critique of Hegelian teleology see: L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans by B. Brewster, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 102-104.

<sup>29</sup> Other philosophers Althusser places within this tradition include, *inter alia*, Epicurus, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger and Derrida. See: L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, trans by G. M. Goshgarian, London, Verso, 2006, p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Machiavelli was the only thinker Althusser names as an aleatory materialist to receive a full work of his own in the form of *Machiavelli and Us*. It should be remembered, however, that Althusser says that he makes "all these historical remarks" only in order to "call attention to" Marx. See: L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, cit., p. 188.

<sup>31</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

possible combinations, the final result being dependent upon how these elements *take hold* of each other as a consequence of the *swerve*. The aleatory materialist current orientates itself, above all, on “the fact of contingency, the fact of the subordination of necessity to contingency”<sup>33</sup>.

The empty space of *The Prince* signifies Machiavelli’s *void*, *The Prince* is the *swerve*. Althusser attributes Machiavelli with answering the most pressing question in philosophy: “with what should one *begin*?”<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli’s novel answer is that all beginnings emerge from the *void*, the space of political practice<sup>35</sup>. The only possible starting position is that unknown represented in the figure of *The Prince*. The Italian nation which does not yet exist is only made possible by thinking within this space. In the terminology of aleatory materialism, in order to think the possible one must think within the *void* between the *atoms*.

Of our two interpreters aleatory materialism is present with Althusser alone, but we can see how Gramsci’s line of thought trends towards this same direction. According to Gramsci, Machiavelli bases himself on “effective reality”<sup>36</sup>. Machiavelli situates himself on what exists “in order to dominate and transcend it ... What ‘ought to be’ is therefore concrete; ... it alone is politics”<sup>37</sup>. Gramsci thus understands politics as the place of beginnings in the same fashion as Althusser. It may be objected that Gramsci directly contradicts this when he says that “the active politician [Machiavelli] ... neither creates from nothing nor does he move in the turbid void of his own desires”<sup>38</sup>. The terms used here can, however, be deceptive. Althusser’s *void* is not a space of speculation and whim. It is a space whose boundaries are delimited by the conjuncture, the emptiness between the various elements of 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Thus, if Gramsci’s Machiavelli seeks to transcend the effective reality it is indeed within the *void* that he must work.

The vision of politics as an empty space presented in the first section can now be provided with foundations. Machiavelli reaches beyond anything presently existing and seeks to fill this empty space with the goal of the new State. What can occur in politics is not predetermined by any other element of the existing structure, from which it has been detached and separated. The implication is, then, that politics should be understood as an autonomous field of social life.

Gramsci argues that it is “implicit” in Machiavelli’s work “that politics is an autonomous activity, with its own principles and laws distinct from those of morality and religion”<sup>39</sup>. Gramsci makes the additional claim that politics can move beyond the imperatives of the economic base. He writes, “politics becomes permanent action ... in so far as it identifies itself with economics. *But it is also distinct from it*”<sup>40</sup>. It is “born on the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>34</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 172.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-140; my emphasis.



... terrain of economic life” but can move beyond any subjection to prevailing economic calculations<sup>41</sup>. There is indeed hardly a word on economics in Machiavelli’s entire oeuvre. Politics is understood as distinct, arising from but coming to break free of any other region of social life. Machiavelli’s innovation is to conceptualize the political as operating towards ends internal to itself.

Prevailing norms of morality and religion make way for The Prince, who, Gramsci says, “takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative”<sup>42</sup>. In the same way as Althusser sought to reject the role that Nature or Reason had played in Western philosophy, so Gramsci displaces such an essentialism in favour of the role of politics. The argument recalls Althusser’s earlier comments in *For Marx* that the alleged central explanatory principle repeatedly advanced by Western philosophers was really only a reflection of the prevailing ideology of their respective eras<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, he was to go on to credit Gramsci with recognizing, if tentatively and briefly, the incompatibility of essentialism with an effective Marxist political practice<sup>44</sup>.

None of this goes any distance to deny Machiavelli’s position as thinking from within what exists. Politics can still only work on those material resources available to it. The political practice of The Prince must work on the world. What The Prince does is *constrained* but not *determined* by the elements which they have at their disposal. The conjuncture sets the conditions of action and points to the solution of the new State as the most favourable outcome. The conjuncture therefore poses not only possibilities, but also risks. Failure to create the new State means that less desirable alternatives may result. It is in order to contain these risks that Machiavelli is provoked in to action in the first place. Practical action in the autonomous sphere of politics is thus the means by which a transition is made possible. Any teleological horizon of linear historical progression is renounced. We have come back to aleatory materialism via Gramsci, where the only relevant fact is that whether The Prince will succeed or not is unknowable in advance<sup>45</sup>.

In using Machiavelli to theorize the political we find that politics must wrench itself free in order to account for the indeterminacy of political practice and the possibility of creating that which is truly new. The conjuncture is a gap, an opening, in which political practice may intervene in order to create something else. The aleatory presents, on the one hand, an opportunity for the founding of the new State. The purpose of this new State is, in turn, to tame the aleatory. Operating under continuing conditions of uncertainty would mean to operate under the persistent threat of instability

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> L. Althusser, *For Marx*, cit., p. 103.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Terray draws the same inference in regards to Gramsci’s view of the contingency of political practice, but does not link this to Althusser’s aleatory materialism. He says that, according to Gramsci, the new State “will see the light of day only if the Prince succeeds”. E. Terray, “An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli”, in A. Callari, D. F. Ruccio (eds.), *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 1996, p. 270.

and replacement. We will now bear witness to the other side of the coin: the subsequent determination of politics.

#### 4. *Machiavelli and Modes of Production*

In order for political practice to be understood as the prime factor in deciding the trajectory of historical development it has been necessary to cast the political field as autonomous from other social structures. The risk in doing so is that the historical process becomes, as a result, reduced to a series of *encounters*, or pure chance, and we are consequently forced to jettison a central claim of historical materialism, the intelligibility of the historical process<sup>46</sup>. The possibility of subsuming social formations under any typology of modes of production would seem to disappear. The aim here is to close the circle and reassert the Marxist character of the work discussed. Firstly, by maintaining the relevance of the category of ‘mode of production’ to the interpretations of Machiavelli put here. If Machiavelli is to be understood as a theorist of transition, as Gramsci and Althusser hope, we must be able to say *from* what and *to* what. Secondly, by investigating the moment of restructuration that is present in Machiavelli’s attempt to create a durable State, it is possible to show that the political does not retain its autonomy.

If Machiavelli is to be understood as a theorist of the conjuncture this can only be achieved, for both Gramsci and Althusser, via the application of the concept of a mode of production. According to Gramsci, Machiavelli’s conjuncture is bounded by three problems: 1) the feudal political structure of the Florentine Republic, 2) the situation within Italy as a whole, dominated by the Papacy and other feudal political forms, and 3) the international situation of the struggle for hegemony by the existing absolutist states of Europe<sup>47</sup>.

Althusser is in agreement with Gramsci on this feudal point of origin. Machiavelli is dismissive of existing forms of rule in *The Prince* precisely because they are “*forms of political existence and organization stamped by feudalism*”<sup>48</sup>. It is the inability of the existing feudal forms to contain the challenge posed by the international situation that presents the new State as a solution. What Machiavelli’s Prince must do “is to put an end to feudal anarchy”<sup>49</sup>. The existing feudal political forms are obsolete as they can no longer contain the aleatory nature of the conjuncture. The conjuncture presents both the chance for the replacement of these forms and the danger of Italy being overwhelmed from outside.

The mode of production that Machiavelli seeks to replace feudalism with proves to be a more complex issue. Gramsci’s view is that Machiavelli’s new State would be “the political form which permitted and facilitated a further development of bourgeois

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, M. Vatter, *Machiavelli After Marx: the Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser*, “Theory and Event”, 7, 2004, n. 4, § 8.

<sup>47</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 71; See also: Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude”, cit., p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 141.

productive forces”<sup>50</sup>. Gramsci thus indicates, but does not follow through with, an overcoming of a stagist procession of modes of production. He does not adequately differentiate between *aim* and *effect*. Gramsci once more pulls at a thread which is left to Althusser to unravel.

What is notable in Althusser’s *Machiavelli and Us* is the *failure* to broach this important problem. It only receives attention when Althusser is expounding Gramsci’s interpretation, to whom he attributes the view that Machiavelli had understood it was “the initial development of the mercantile and capitalist bourgeoisie” that “posed the problem” at hand<sup>51</sup>. This would appear to be a possible inspiration for Mikko Lahtinen’s assessment of Machiavelli as an organic intellectual of the Italian bourgeoisie<sup>52</sup>. Althusser, however, comes to point us in a different direction. He does not situate Machiavelli as a bourgeois intellectual so much as caught *between* feudal thought and the properly bourgeois tradition of the social contract theorists<sup>53</sup>. The course we must take to find a solution is signalled when Althusser argues that Machiavelli plays witness to “*primitive political accumulation*”<sup>54</sup>. Althusser is clearly playing on Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation as a formative stage in the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. Prior to *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser had already developed an original account of how primitive accumulation relates to the genesis of capitalism. This is the reason for the omission: Althusser had already provided the answer.

To grasp the nature of this innovation, we must go back to *For Marx*. Here the Hegelian expressive totality is broken apart and replaced with the ‘complex whole’. Rather than a line of determination running from the base to the superstructure, Althusser limits this causal mechanism to determination in the last instance alone. Other instances within the complex whole are thus endowed with an efficacy of their own, irreducible to the operations of the economy. Additionally, the class contradictions lodged in the economy are never expressed in pure form, but are displaced and mediated through the other levels of society with which the economy is articulated<sup>55</sup>. One consequence is to say that we can no longer judge proceedings according to a single metric of historical time, but rather that each instance has to be considered as changing according to its own schedule<sup>56</sup>. There is an uneven development of the various levels relative to one another<sup>57</sup>.

Althusser is now in a position to argue that modes of production are only realized after the independent emergence of their elements become consolidated. They are a category we apply to history, not a category that governs historical development. A mode of production is only “*a particular ‘combination’ of elements*”; each of the elements “*are*

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>51</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> M. Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism*, trans. by G. Griffiths, & K. Köhli, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2011, p. 83.

<sup>53</sup> L. Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude”, cit., pp. 123-124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> L. Althusser, *For Marx*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>56</sup> L. Althusser, E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, transl. by B. Brewster, London, Verso, 2009, pp. 110-111.

<sup>57</sup> For a fuller exposition of this material see: A. Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism*, London, Pluto Press, 1976, pp. 39-52.

*independent of each other*, each resulting from its own specific history”<sup>58</sup>. The various components required for the constitution of a mode of production have their own historical origins, origins which may have nothing to do with their eventual fusion.

It is in light of this that Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation, and Machiavelli’s primitive political accumulation, must be understood. Althusser argues that primitive accumulation occurred for reasons that had nothing to do with capitalism. To suggest as much was to read history as predestined to arrive at certain results: the error of teleology and thus determinism. Primitive accumulation contributed to a result which had no bearing on its cause<sup>59</sup>. It is only once the landless labour that it created is combined with other historical events that we are able to judge that a mode of production, with its own structural logic, has come in to being. The various elements eventually become consolidated in a “*structure of dependence*”, but they originated from a series of unrelated causes<sup>60</sup>. Thus they do not exist *for* the mode of production. The creation of the various elements that may eventually combine is attributable to a sequence of aleatory *encounters*.

Considered along these lines Machiavelli is a theorist of transition but at *the level of the political alone*, according to the historical time of that instance and no other. Machiavelli is no more an intellectual of the bourgeois class than he is attempting to enact capitalist development in Italy. This may be the result of the *smerve* he seeks to unleash, as a cascade of *encounters* occurs across the *atoms* of Italian society. However, this is not his aim; he only has one objective: the construction of the new State. Nevertheless, he is aware that to do this means placing at the disposal of the political other elements of society that previously governed it. Machiavelli attempts to create a durable State, “*a state that lasts*”<sup>61</sup>.

The purpose of this new State is to offer security against aleatory contingency. It simultaneously takes advantage of the conjuncture and seeks to overcome it. Because the nobility are irrevocably tied to the political forms that already exist, and because the new politics must be genuinely new and not based on that which is already there, The Prince must call the people into political life. Hence the new State must be a popular State, and in order to realize this, the people must recognize themselves *in* The Prince. Such is the function of Machiavelli’s call for a hegemonic State that uses both force and consent<sup>62</sup>. The political acquires autonomy from existing moral and religious ideas only to construct them anew in order to secure the new State. So Gramsci says that The Prince “*revolutionises the whole system of intellectual and moral relations*”<sup>63</sup>. The unity of the prevailing ideology is broken in order to reconstruct it in a new way. A popularly-based national army is the primary apparatus by which this achieved. Machiavelli conceives of a mass national army which is *both* a repressive force and a means of generating consent<sup>64</sup>. “To be a New Prince”, Althusser argues, “is at one and the same time to know how to

<sup>58</sup> L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, cit., pp. 198-199.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>61</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>62</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 169-170; N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> A. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince”, cit., p. 133.

<sup>64</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., pp. 88-89.

fashion these instruments of state power (the army) or seize hold of them (religion), and to utilize them to realize a popular politics”<sup>65</sup>.

The complex whole is reordered; the internal operations of levels that previously governed the political are now subjected to its concerns, which is first and foremost the production and reproduction of the durable State. A massification of politics takes place in calling the people to action. But they must also be controlled, lest they seek to go beyond the form of the new State. Popular political participation initiates a new conjuncture, and with it new aleatory problems. Initially, the new State is directed at resolving a problem imposed externally – protection from the absolutist states – but must subsequently direct its attention inwards in order to control the very agency it has required for its own construction. As Althusser puts it, “the class struggle” is “the origin of the laws that limit it”<sup>66</sup>. Popular forces must be mobilised under the leadership of the Prince and then subsequently contained once more.

The site of hegemony is shifted from its feudal iteration in the Church to the State, which we recognize in hindsight to be an organization of politics characteristic of capitalism. Machiavelli is the first theorist not only of the conjuncture, but of modern ideological state apparatuses. Morality and religion are made to serve the needs of the State. Machiavelli deals with this transition from a pre-modern politics, which is subordinate to ideological pressures outside itself, to a situation in which ideology is deployed in the service politics and organised by the State. The creation of a popular nation State is purely and only a response to the problem of the insufficiency of feudal *political* forms to resist external threats. There is no pretention of finishing off feudalism as a mode of production, even if the changes brought about by the Machiavellian project may have set in motion a chain of events that caused that additional result.

The autonomy of the political found in the last section is consequently undone. The result of the new State directing itself inwards so as to control the spectre of popular agency is to bind the political back to the structure of the whole. Other social instances may have been profoundly influenced by changes at the level of the political but maintain their relative autonomy and effectivity: their subjection is never absolute. Morality and religion are recrafted in order to sustain the new State, and in turn they place constraints upon it which cannot be broken with and transcended without beginning the process of rupture once more. Thus politics is not only determining, but continues to receive determinate limits from outside itself. The State must be durable in order to maintain the prevailing relations of production in Italy, whose existing political forms could not guarantee their protection from external intervention. Machiavelli may then be better understood as seeking out forms of protection for prevailing feudal property relations than as someone trying to supersede them.

The new State is therefore not *for* the bourgeoisie, but it might inadvertently assist their advance. It is in this way that the essential thesis of Marxism previously placed in to question now re-emerges unchallenged. The political transformation required to sustain feudalism serves to create its own gravediggers. The solution to this conjuncture puts in

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>66</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, cit., p. 59.

place the conditions for a new one, presenting the possibility of bourgeois supremacy that is itself dependent on the success or failure of a future political practice.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper opened with an account of how Gramsci and Althusser analyzed the unification of theory and practice within the textual form of *The Prince*. Machiavelli rejects the traditional method of theory as passive observation. Instead, his attempts to understand the conjuncture are also interventions within it. He calls on his reader to take the space of *The Prince* and implement the political transformation he seeks. Following this, the philosophical implications of envisaging political practice in this way were examined. Althusser situates Machiavelli within a particular philosophical tradition that stands apart from the dominant Western current. Machiavelli's thought is subversive because it emphasises the transitory nature of social forms, which can never be truly permanent and are always at risk of challenge.

In order to transition from one social form to another the conscious action of a political agent is required. Outcomes dependent on political practice can never be determined in advance, because political practice may always fail in its aims, and therefore the path of history is always in flux. The political sphere operates as the place in which this indeterminacy is realized and influenced, breaking itself free of external imperatives in order to construct something new. The final section analyzes how the two accounts of Machiavelli discussed here continue to rely on the concept of a mode of production in order to understand him. It is the deployment of this category that enables the Marxist readings of Machiavelli as distinctive reinterpretations. The previously suggested autonomy of politics comes full circle and is reintegrated, via Althusser's notion of the complex whole, into a historical materialist account. The creativity of autonomous politics is purposefully mitigated via the durable State in order to tame the presence of aleatory risks.

It is not the case, then, that Althusser's aleatory materialism posits the singular case as having analytical primacy over structural form. Rather, what we find is an attempt to articulate the two moments in such a way that does not abandon the central insights of historical materialism. Whilst it is true Althusser concentrates on the contingent nature of political practice in Machiavelli's work, the comparison pursued with Gramsci serves to highlight the other dimension. Machiavelli's project sets out both to take advantage of the instability in the existing mode of production and attempts to alleviate that same instability. Failing to solve this problem could potentially plunge Italian feudalism into a much deeper crisis, thus why Machiavelli acts. This is the point at which Gramsci struggled, caught halfway between Hegelian Marxism and what would become Althusser's later innovations. It is also where the considerable continuity between Althusser's early and later work should be noted, for the interpretation put in *Machiavelli and Us* relies heavily on the reconceptualization of the expressive totality into the complex whole that took place in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. Machiavelli's work is about the specific effectivity of politics. He is a theorist of transition from one political

form to another. What occurs is an alteration of the organization of society's various instances, which in turn impacts on the operations of the economic base of the mode of production but does not transform it in any immediate or direct way.

On balance, it must be considered that there is an underlying unity between Gramsci and Althusser's views on how Marxists should understand Machiavelli. Gramsci is at his strongest when he interprets Machiavelli as an early theorist of hegemony, the need to secure the new State by both coercion and consent. The matters of political practice, the conjuncture, The Prince as an empty space to be occupied and this space as the place of beginnings, topics that Althusser takes up, are all first present in Gramsci, albeit usually in a form that lacks the terminology and precision that one might desire. It was Althusser that made them explicit but he does so through Gramsci, preserving the essential features of his interpretation and expanding upon them. One noteworthy aspect of *Machiavelli and Us* is its almost complete lack of criticism for Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli. This does not mean that at every point Althusser assents to Gramsci's argument, but that the overriding relationship between Gramsci's writings on Machiavelli and Althusser's is one of continuity and development rather than reproach.

Consequently, it can reasonably be inferred that Althusser viewed Gramsci more favourably than is often accounted for. By the time of his later writings, Althusser clearly felt himself to be closer to Gramsci than he made explicit. Gramsci's view of Machiavelli as a theorist of the singular case, the conjuncture, even whilst not expressed in those terms, demonstrates that Gramsci cannot be so easily categorised with the 'historicists' whom Althusser criticised in *For Marx*. Although evidence to the contrary might be raised, as it has been by Althusser, a plausible conclusion is that Gramsci's work is traversed by competing problematics. He is caught between an inherited deterministic conception of Marxism and an attempt to break out of it, an attempt facilitated and fueled by Machiavelli just as Machiavelli informed Althusser's attempts to do the same.

Whatever other disputes one may wish to lay at their doors Gramsci and Althusser both agree on the importance of Machiavelli for Marxists. It is evident from their work in this area that Machiavelli above all provides resources for a Marxist political philosophy able to meet the challenges in their own conjunctures. What captivates them about Machiavelli is his *method*. Machiavelli eschews both notions of permanent stability and those of laws governing historical development in favour of the primacy of political practice. It matters what political actors do and how they do it. Political practice becomes the primary factor involved in influencing the outcomes of particular conjunctures. Machiavelli is able to capture this within the form of text which calls upon its reader to act. *The Prince* is a revolutionary manifesto, a call to action that invites potential agents to create something new. Marxism has historically had difficulty reconciling its own call to action with a deterministic conception of historical development. Both Gramsci and Althusser use Machiavelli to try and resolve this problem. Thus the reason Gramsci and Althusser both take us back to Machiavelli is to try and inform our present, to call on us to do the work required to effect a transformation in our own time. In order to make a contribution to doing so, in the realm of political philosophy, we would do well to follow the approach of Gramsci and

Althusser to Machiavelli, returning to the past not in order to repeat it but to use it to extend and enlarge our conceptual framework in the present.